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Missing the Iran Arms Story: Did the Press Fail?

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 3 — It is now clear that dozens of people — officials at the White House, the State Department, the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency, as well as private arms dealers, businessmen and financiers in Israel and other countries — knew early on about the delivery of American arms to Iran that began in August 1985.

Similarly, a network of pilots and retired military officers knew that the "covert" American efforts to aid the rebels fighting the Marxist Government of Nicaragua were far more extensive than the White House acknowledged.

But, even with all these people in on the Iran-Nicaragua story that would shake the Reagan Presidency, the American press was not.

With just a few exceptions, little noticed, the seeds of the scandal did not take root on the nation's front pages and news broadcasts until after a Lebanese magazine, Al Shiraa, reported Nov. 3 that America had been supplying arms to the Teheran regime.

And it was another three weeks before the press relayed the news, disclosed by Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d on Nov. 25, that some of the profits from the arms sales had been diverted to the Nicaraguan rebels in an operation supervised by Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, a member of the staff of the National Security Council.

'The Press Failed'

"The press was lax in this case," said Michael G. Gartner, editor of The Courier-Journal in Louisville, Ky., who is president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. "The press failed, and its failure allowed the policy to continue, and the continuance of it led to this enormous scandal. Part of this scandal must be laid at the doorstep of the press."

Jack Nelson, Washington bureau chief of The Los Angeles Times, said he did not fully understand how the White House had been able to keep the Iran affair "secret for so long, inasumuch as so many people knew about it."

How did it happen?

"There was an elaborate effort to keep the operation secret from the press, the Congress and various people in the Administration," said Bob Woodward, who played a key role in uncovering the Watergate scandal and is now an assistant managing editor of The Washington Post.

Journalists "who work in Washington and cover institutions couldn't get the story," he said. But, he added, pieces of it might have been obtained from people outside Washington — various middlemen, pilots, bankers, perhaps even some of the "bellhops in the Teheran Hilton."

Officials Deceived Officials

Access to information about the covert activities was extremely restricted within the established bureaucracy, a normal source of information for journalists in Washington. Government officials deceived one another, as well as the public.

A Presidential review board's report last week disclosed that in May, for instance, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, who was President Reagan's national security adviser at the time, instructed Colonel North not to talk to William J. Casey, then the Director of Central Intelligence, or anybody else about his "operational roles." In June, Admiral Poindexter said that Secretary of State George P. Shultz "knows nothing about the prior financing" of the contras and added, "It should stay that way."

In addition, journalists note, Administration officials did not tell Congress about the covert activities, precluding any disclosure by lawmakers or their aides. Last August, after Colonel North misled a Congressional committee investigating his work with the contras, Admiral Poindexter commended him, saying, "Well done," according to the board headed by former Senator John G. Tower.

Admiral Poindexter, who supervised American policy toward Iran and the Niacaraguan counterrevolutionaries, had expressed disdain for the press. He was not inclined to disclose details of the covert operations.

And It Was Hard to Imagine

Also, journalists say, President Reagan's Iran initiative was protected from disclosure because it was so improbable that few journalists would have suspected it. "This operation was protected partly because it seemed so preposterous," John Walcott, national security correspondent for The Wall Street Journal, said in an interview.

Debates among Government officials are often a source of information for journalists. But Herbert E. Hetu, a spokesman for the Tower commission, said that President Reagan's staff had permitted little debate on the decision to sell arms to Iran.

"There just wasn't any debate going on," he said. "No winners. No losers. No leaks."

However, the syndicated columnists Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta wrote last June that the United States was "kowtowing to Khomeini," offering arms in exchange for hostages. In later columns, they reported details of the United States' "conciliatory tilt toward Iran."

Mr. Van Atta said he received calls from many reporters trying to follow up on the columns. But the reporters generally failed because they could not obtain confirmation from the State Department or intelligence agencies.

Press Was Easy on Reagan

The columnist said Government officials discouraged him from writing about the negotiations with Iran last year, on the ground that any publicity might endanger the hostages' lives.

"Reagan was popular and the press was not," Mr. Van Atta said. "At that time, the President would probably have won any dispute with the press on national security issues."

Even when the first hints of the arms shipments began to emerge, American journalists were slow to pick up the story.

Robert C. McFarlane, the former national security adviser, visited Iran in an effort to secure the release of American hostages in May 1986. An article about his mission was carried in late October in a small Lebanese newspaper connected to the pro-Iranian group Hezbollah, the Party of God, according to the Tower commission.

"The article was based on a series of leaflets distributed in Teheran" on Oct. 15 or 16, it said.

John P. Wallach, the foreign affairs editor of the Hearst newspapers, and Nathan M. Adams, a senior editor of Reader's Digest, are among the few journalists who reported pieces of the story before it became widely known.

In July 1985, Mr. Wallach reported that the United States and Iran had exchanged messages expressing a desire to improve relations. On Nov. 3 last year, he reported that the United States had been conducting "secret negotiations with Iran" for 16 months.

In Reader's Digest last August, Mr. Adams wrote, "Israel is one of Iran's most reliable sources for both arms and munitions, despite denials by the Israeli Government."

The New York Times reported on Aug. 8, 1985, that the contras were receiving "direct military advice from White House officials" on the staff of the National Security Council. The name of Colonel North was withheld at the request of the White House, which said that publishing the name would endanger his life.

Other news organizations and members of Congress also investigated Colonel North's activities and identified him by name.

"We knew North was a mystery figure," said Mr. Nelson of The Los Angeles Times. "We wrote stories about him. But we did not delve deep enough. We should have."

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